

If Democrats Want to Stop Fraud, They Should Start with Public School Districts

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With the new year here and the 2025 legislative session officially underway, Democrats are already proving they can't learn a lesson. Led by Governor Katie Hobbs, one of their primary targets is once again...you guessed it...Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program. Stop us if you've heard this before.

You would think that Democrats would find a different target after getting trounced in an election where teachers' unions and other anti-school choice groups [made it a referendum on school choice](#). But no. After 2 ½ years and [multiple failures](#) trying to overturn school choice, they'd rather double down on their same tired and out-of-touch policies.

This time, Hobbs and the Dems say they [want to roll back ESAs](#) because of all the supposed "fraud" in the program. Never mind the fact that the rate of waste, fraud, and abuse in the ESA

program is [extremely low](#). Never mind the fact that ESAs have [proven](#) to be far more financially accountable than other government programs. Democrats don't care about facts. Instead, they want to regulate this popular program while Arizona's Democrat Attorney General Kris Mayes [asks](#) for more funding to investigate ESA fraud.

But here's a message for Hobbs, Mayes, and the rest of the Democrats:

If you care so much about fraud, why not investigate Arizona's public school districts?

They could start with Isaac Elementary School District (IESD).

Earlier this week, IESD was placed under a state receivership after it was [determined](#) that it had a budget shortfall of over **\$12 million!** And this didn't come as a surprise. The Auditor General has been [trying](#) to stop the mismanagement of funds in this school district for five years!

A \$12 million budget shortfall in just one school district is mind-blowing, but IESD is certainly not alone. School districts throughout our state have been mismanaging millions, going into default, and committing fraud for years.

Back in 2022, Mesa Public Schools (MPS) [failed](#) to explain where \$32.3 million of their federal emergency funds slated for COVID expenses went. The investigation came after reports that MPS teachers were asking parents to donate basic school supplies they were running out of because the district wouldn't cover them. But instead of having a clear explanation for the money that was buried under expenses listed as "other," "indirect costs," and "etc.," MPS officials dodged the question and claimed no records existed for those categories.

Also, in 2022, a former superintendent and another employee from Toltec Elementary School District were [indicted](#) for fraudulent schemes, misuse of public monies, and theft. This came after the employees secretly used their personal monies to fraudulently inflate their Arizona State Retirement System benefits.

Then, there's Higley Unified School District (HUSD). Back in 2021, HUSD's now-former superintendent, Dr. Denise Birdwell, was [indicted](#) on 18 counts related to procurement fraud, misuse of public monies, fraudulent schemes and practices, and more. This came after the Auditor General found that Dr. Birdwell conspired with employees of Education Facilities Development Services (EFDS) to circumvent school district procurement rules to improperly award the group with a \$2.5 million project development service contract for the construction of two new schools. On top of that, the Auditor General also found that Dr. Birdwell misused public monies when she authorized the unlawful use of \$6 million in restricted public funds toward the construction of the schools.

And let's not forget what happened in Yuma County toward the end of last year when a former superintendent secretary with the Hyder Elementary School District was [indicted](#) for theft, misuse of public monies, and forgery. The indictment came just eight weeks after the same woman was arrested in Scottsdale in connection with an elaborate scheme against the Cocopah Middle School Association of Parents and Teachers.

You won't hear about any of this type of fraud from Hobbs, Mayes, or other Democrats because this isn't about fraud. It never was. They just want to find any way they can to regulate our state's historic school choice program—all to protect their buddies in the teachers' unions.

But here's a message for Hobbs and Mayes. Whether you like it or not, school choice is here to stay in Arizona. And we will keep fighting back with this winning message because every student in our state deserves the best education possible and the funding to make it happen. Instead of griping about ESAs, which have way more oversight than the typical school district, show us that you really care about fraud and start investigating our public schools.

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